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A  
L E T T E R

CONCERNING

*The Use and Method*

O F

STUDYING HISTORY.

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*By the* AUTHOR *of* LETTERS *concerning*  
MIND.

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L O N D O N :

Printed for JOHN and JAMES RIVINGTON,  
in *St. Paul's Church-Yard*.

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M.DCC.LIII.

MO 911.1753.P44



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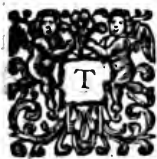
# LETTER

CONCERNING

*The Use and Method*

OF

STUDYING HISTORY.



THE true USE and right METHOD of Studying HISTORY, as well as of any liberal Art or Science, can only be deduced from the Theory of the UNDERSTANDING ; and from thence it will be seen, that the Knowledge or Comprehension of general *Precepts, Precedents, political Maxims, Sentiments, or general Ideas*

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(as

(as they are called), in Morality, and in the Affairs and Transactions of human Life, is acquired in *Time*; whereas the Mind comprehends in an *Instant* the general Idea in Science. This, however strange it may appear at the first View, will be found to depend on the antient Doctrine of *Numbers*. Thus ----\* *Sense is prior to Memory; many Memories make one Experience, or general Idea, &c.* It is this Theory which makes me so highly value *History*, from which I have received great Benefit; as well as from the Account I have taken of myself, and of other Men, which may likewise not improperly be called *History*.

Now, as it is pleasant to view the inward Features of living Characters, and to observe how easy and contented one of them could be without what another could no more part with than his Cloaths, or perhaps his

\* Aristot. *Analyt. post. ad fin.* *Metaph. ad prin.*



Skin ; so it is likewise pleasant to view Men of the same Rank in the same or different States or Nations in different Periods of Time.

An old *Roman*, for Instance, could live very *easy* and *happy* without many things that were deemed essential to the *Happiness* of another *Roman* who many Ages after him took his Turn in Life. In this way of Thinking, one is naturally led to distinguish between *Nature*, and *Custom* or *Fashion* ; a Distinction, upon which the very Being of PHILOSOPHY depends.

For when Man is considered in his *natural State*, as a *social Creature*, independent of *Custom* or *Fashion* ; it will be then seen how few his *natural Wants* are ; and when these are supplied, and he is provided for in a proper manner, how *mean*, how *inhuman*, it is to live upon the common Stock, and at the same time to affect a *Superiority*, and to

*tyrannize* over his Fellow-Creatures. The Relation of Man to Man is founded in *Reason* ; which unites them together in Society ; and on this Principle their All, their Affections, depend : In this way of *Reason* alone Man ought to deal with Mankind ; and, as *Reason* is to every one the Cause of his own Happiness, he has no Occasion to use *Force* or *Violence*, or any thing else but *Reason*, with his *Fellow--Creature*, who by *Reason* alone is his *Fellow*.

As all things are provided for Man, in his *natural* State, by *Nature* herself ; so, let his Station in Life be high or low, he may afford, tho' not in the common way, to be generous and beneficent in the highest Degree. Having no other Intention than that of serving Mankind according to the original Design of Supreme Wisdom, he will have no other Disposition towards particular Members of Society but what is kind and good-natured  
acting

acting and behaving towards all without any Motive from *Fear*, *Hatred*, *Anger*, *Suspicion*, *Jealousy*, or *Selfishness*, or *Cunning*, in any respect whatever. Were his *natural* Wants so many, as to make him dependent on particular Persons, there would be little Reason to speak so highly of him: But as he has ample Provision made for him, if he will raise himself to that Height which *Nature* (not *Custom* or *Fashion*) points out to him, it is evident he will have infinitely more *Dignity*, *Worth*, and *Excellence* than many of those on whom these Appellations are commonly bestowed.

The *Dignity* and *Excellence* of Man seems to imply a Relation or Reference to what he is commonly found to be. The common Idea of *Excellence* is taken from the most vulgar Objects by which Men are distinguished one above another, such as *Wealth*, *Power*, a *Title*, a *Name*. But  
these

these Distinctions have Place only in their *particular Societies*, and are founded only on *particular Ideas*; whereas the true Idea of *Excellence* is taken from what Man is in his *unimproved* State, and what he is when he has attained the utmost *Perfection*.

And here it will be proper to consider the human *Form*, as varied and diversified in the several Ranks and Orders of Men, not only in the State and Nation in which we live, but in others; as well those that are more *rude* and *barbarous*, as those that are more *polished* and *refined*.

Now, if you would speculate the Varieties of the human *Form* in the antient *States* or *Polities*, you may fix your Eye upon *Athens*. This, in a manner, brings into View all the rest, by accompanying the *Atbenian* People thro' all Changes or Revolutions; making your Center the Time in which *Socrates* lived, and so going upwards and downwards. Recourse  
must

must be had to those Authors that will be useful in this respect ; and the more you have, the less time you need bestow on this Study : For they are only to be used as they are useful to your End, and to be read here and there, as they will serve to give Light, in answering any *particular* as well as the *general* End proposed.

In this way of Reading, the Study of any one of them, besides XENOPHON, as a fine Author, may be laid aside intirely.

PLUTARCH'S *Lives*, as well as LIVY, will be both useful for the Account they give of *Rome*, as well as *Greece*.

POLYBIUS, as he writes of *Greece* and *Italy*, will certainly give some new Light.

DIODORUS SICULUS, in my Opinion, is a poor Compiler : The *English Translation* is only the *fabulous* Part of him.

Archbishop POTTER's *Antiquities* should be always at hand.

There are other Authors, such as DIONYSIUS of *Halicarnassus*, and the like, which may be of further Use.

In this Way of Study, there is no Occasion for the best Editions: And as for Language, I would not in the least be retarded by it, except where there was a remarkable Passage that deserved to be dwelt upon.

I need not mention the Care that ought to be taken in placing things in the *Order of Time*, and of using all these Authors above-mentioned as *One Author*, following the Order of Time. For it will be easy, for Example, to pick out from all of them whatever is in them relating to the State of *Athens* at any particular Period of Time: And if I fixed my Mind upon this Question, *What the Athenians were, and how Things went with them, at that time*, I would consult

sult all my Authors; and so of the *Lacedæmonians*.

To make this Study go on easily, it may not be amiss to keep a Common-place Book for Memorandums and Observations, and for setting down the Pages in your Authors that you have read, or shall read, on any remarkable Transaction, or Part of History.

HERODOTUS is chiefly to be consulted, where he gives us the Situation of *Greece* with regard to the *Persians*. What he is mostly admired for, in following *Homer's* manner of Narration, in raising Curiosity, then diverting it by old *out of the way* Tales, then renewing it again, is really a great Fault in him as an Historian. It is Fancy, tho' a fine one.

The *Order of Time* in an Historian ought to be accurately observed.

As to what THUCYDIDES has concerning the State of *Greece*, however  
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strange it may seem to us, it was however necessary to be placed in the Beginning of his History: How odd else would the *Corcyraeans* applying to the *Athenians* appear! There is likewise a Reason, I suppose, for that summary Account he gives of the *Athenians* for Fifty Years together (as I remember) out of the Date of his History.

As for fine *Speeches* in this Author, I would throw away no time in studying them.

If you have any Inclination of forming an Idea of the *Athenian* ELOQUENCE, you may compare those two Orations of DEMOSTHENES and ÆSCHINES ΠΕΡΙ ΤΟΥ ΣΤΕΦΑΝΟΥ. The Heads of the Argument must first be taken, and the Nature of the thing itself, as explained in Archbishop *Potter's Antiquities*. When you are Master of the Subject, both may be read at Leisure. I cannot help mentioning this, as it was really a Trial  
of



of Skill ; and there was the noblest, the politest Audience, that perhaps ever was in the World before or since. Not only *Athenians*, but *Gentlemen* from all Parts of *Greece*, assembled (as may be seen from the Oration of *Demosthenes* himself) to see what the Powers and Forces of *Eloquence* could do.

As for the *Speeches* of *Livy*, I need not caution you against throwing away Time upon them ; tho', in the *Roman* and modern Taste, they may be reckoned to excel even those of *Xenophon*.

As to any modern *Reflections on Ancient History*, or the *Histories of Greece or Rome*, I believe you had best read sparingly a while : For how is it possible, that you should be a proper Judge of what they write on a rational Bottom ? For this is to be considered ; and this can only be done by following the Plan here laid down.

Consider therefore again: You are to lay aside all *Prejudice*, *Opinion*, or *Imagination*, that you hitherto have entertained of the *Grecians* and *Romans*; and even those very *Ideas* which may accompany those very Names. You are to consider them only as *Men*; that is to say, to consider the various Forms into which the human Mind sprouted out in these Countries in different *Times*, and under different *Governments*.

And how are you to know this, so far as it may be known, so as to judge of another Man's Knowledge in this Kind? By consulting all the original Authors that can give any Light into this Subject; by finding out who have the most Credit among them, and who have the least; so as to judge of the latter by the former, and of all more modern Writers, by this *original Knowledge*, if I may so call it, since they all draw from the same Sources.

Now,

Now by this perhaps may be seen the Reason why I mentioned the getting so many antient Historians. This *Multiplicity of Authors* will breed no Confusion in the least in the way of Reading proposed. He that thus follows this *Method of studying History* will, in a little time, be a better Judge of what is truly useful in History than many great Critics who spend their whole Lives in it. A Man cannot think how much Time he may save himself in this Way till he has got into it.

As to the *Characters of Authors*, you will find them out almost at Sight ; and how far, where, and when, and on what Occasion, to use them : And this, without laying any *Task* upon yourself, may be done at Pleasure. If the Diversion be a little regular, it will not be the less *Diversion* upon that Account. You may go and come to it when you please, and intermix any other  
Studies

Studies as you please. The very *Knowledge of what is knowable* in this Kind is valuable.

As to the *Credit of your Authors*, what have you more to do than to consider their *Capacity, Integrity*, and their *Opportunities of being informed*, as living in or near the Time about which They wrote, and their being conversant, or not conversant, in public Affairs ?

To such Authors the first Credit belongs ; and the next to others, who, though they lived at a great Distance of Time from the Transaction they wrote about, had yet many such *original Authors* to consult, which were in being then, tho' they are now lost.

It is this very thing that makes *Plutarch* so valuable an Author.

A Man may find so much Pleasure in this Way of studying, that he will have Occasion to restrain himself,

himself, and perhaps have some Trouble in doing it.---

PAUSANIAS I should have mentioned before ; and likewise TULLY's Works ; which will be of considerable Use, even with regard to the History of *Greece* itself. For a Specimen, read that amiable Beginning of his last Book *de Finibus*.

The like Method of studying History may be applied to any State or Nation.

In relation to what is said above of Man considered in his *natural State*, independent of *Custom* or *Fashion*, it may further be observed, that Mankind united together in *Society* is the Object of *natural Affection*. This is founded in a Sense of what we all owe to Mankind in this respect, in being contented with the common Lot of Humanity without aspiring above other Men. *Ambition* is but a kind of *Tyranny*.

If Mankind have their Blemishes discoverable in all Ranks or Orders of Men, this can be no Objection against *Philanthropy*, or *Benevolence to Mankind*, if we find, from Experience, ourselves so constituted or formed, that, on a just Harmony of other Affections with this Affection, *Joy*, or a *Sense of Beauty* (as it is called), instantly springs up in the Mind. For in this Case Happiness will be within ourselves, in our own Power, and will be further improved by a religious Veneration for the *Order of Things*, and by conforming our own Understanding to that which is *supreme* ; for thus *Virtue* and *Religion* are united. The Result of this Union is a noble ENTHUSIASM, which implies the highest *Magnanimity*, or most exalted Pitch of *human Perfection*.

How widely different from this true Greatness of Mind is that which is assumed by some of those, that,  
according

according to Custom, are called *Great Men* ! When they are in *high Spirits* (as they express themselves when explicit), it is not from the Consideration of their Rank and Dignity *in Nature*, but from their Superiority over a *Part of Mankind* in respect of *Power, Fortune, a Title, &c.* How *mean* and *abject* will these *fashionable* Characters be found, when weighed in the Balance of *Righteousness*, and compared not only with the *truly Great* in high Stations, who befriend Mankind, but also with others, who are, in *Truth* and *Nature*, the *Superiors* of such *Great Men* !

By their own Principles, they are as *low* and *mean* in one respect, as they are *high* and *proud* in another. Yet, as they most abound in Things beyond what are natural and necessary, they look upon themselves as *happy Men* ; their *Airs* and *Manners*

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being fuitable to their imagined *Grandeur*. They value themselves above others, in proportion as they are above them in these outward Advantages ; and others, that have the same Opinion of *Happiness*, or *Good*, with them, allow them this Superiority ; and court, cringe, and flatter, for what they can get, and even adore them.

But is it not better to be *happy*, tho' in Disgrace with the Small as well as the Great, than it is to be *unhappy* or *miserable*, whilst all the World thinks the contrary, and envies and admires an *imagin'd* Happiness ? Real *Happiness* is *Self-enjoyment*, free from *Fear*, *Slavery*, *Disappointment*, attended with *Self-esteem*, and the *highest* Opinion of it, as what cannot be improved by Man, or any thing in the Possession of Man ; and what is likewise conformable to the *Order of Things* at large,  
and



and to that *Divine* PRINCIPLE of INTELLIGENCE, by which the Whole in general, and every Part in particular, is governed and conducted.





# REMARKS.

**P**AGE I. GENERAL PRECEPTS.]  
 ---The *General Precepts* of wise and good Men, recorded either in History, or their own Works, deserve the greatest Notice and Regard, and are to be received and embraced as *known Truths* ; because they *had*, what we perhaps have *not*, the Eye of Experience. If this be allowed, the *Precepts* of wise and good Men, whilst living, though for the most part disregarded, call for the same Respect, for the very same Reason.

Page 3. PHILOSOPHY.]---Philosophy likewise depends on the Knowledge of the Wisdom of the great Folks

Folks of the World, and their Pursuit of *Happiness*, or *Good*. Amongst the *Great Folks* are included the Men of *Learning*, and false Philosophers, as well as the *Rich*, and the Men of *Power*. What these Men are, in their real Characters, we may learn from Ourselves, from Poetry, and from History : And, in this View, the Life of *Cicero* is the best History, surely, that is in Being ; not only because the Subject of it is the greatest, but because in reality it is, as I take it, the truest History extant. For many Years I have laid aside the Works of *Cicero*, so as not to look into them for any Aid or Assistance in Life ; and, by viewing him in the Light in which he is placed by Dr. *Middleton*, I am now of Opinion, that I was not in the Wrong in doing it. The Doctor is a polite modern Writer ; and, from his own Sense of Things, you may be confirmed in your Sentiments of the

Taste

Taste of the Age, and, from the Life of *Cicero*, of the Taste of the *Romans* in their most admired Characters. *Cicero* is the Idol of the Historian ; a Man of Virtue, Philosophy, &c. But, by perusing his Work, may it not be seen, that neither *Cicero* himself, nor the Generality of the *Romans*, had a Sense of Virtue, as it stands in *Nature*, and was understood by the antient *Athenians* ?

Page 5. CUSTOM OR FASHION.]---  
 From *Custom* or *Fashion*, *Prejudice*, *Prepossession*, *Presumption*, or the *thinking we know what we do not know*, which is the Cause of all Error in Life, and particularly the Reason we cannot lay aside ill Habits, Things appear little to us that are not so. It is in *Practice* as it is in *Science* : The noblest Train of *Actions*, like the noblest Truths in *Science*, depend upon a few obvious and seemingly contemptible Principles : And, no doubt, it is from the Consideration of these little things that  
 the

the Perfection of Good-breeding takes its Rise.

Page 7. LIVY.] ---- “ This very  
 “ thing,” says LIVY in his Introduc-  
 tion, “ is chiefly useful and beneficial  
 “ in the Knowledge of Things ; to  
 “ speculate instructive Examples of  
 “ every Kind delineated on some il-  
 “ lustrious Monument ; from whence  
 “ you may copy both for yourself,  
 “ and for your Country, and from  
 “ whence you may be instructed  
 “ how to avoid what is foul in  
 “ the *Commencement*, and foul in  
 “ the *Conclusion*.” — But, by the  
 way, is not this most of all delight-  
 ful, and most excellent in the Know-  
 ledge of Things ---- to speculate the  
 Cause of All, KNOWLEDGE itself, or  
 SCIENCE, ART, PRUDENCE, VIRTUE,  
 HONESTY, MANKIND under various  
 Forms of Government ; whatever is  
 BEAUTIFUL in particular Things  
 about us, and in this sensible World  
 at large ? See *Let. concerning Mind*.

Page

Page 7. POLYBIUS.] --- What POLYBIUS says of himself may be applied to all good Historians : “ I  
 “ have recorded Things,” says he,  
 “ that they who read these Com-  
 “ mentaries may be rendered better  
 “ by them : For all Men have two  
 “ Ways of Improvement, one arising  
 “ from their own Experience,  
 “ and one from the Experience of  
 “ others.” ---

CORNELIUS NEPOS says of THEMISTOCLES, that he had lived a debauched Life, and afterwards became the Deliverer of Greece; *Quod et de instantibus verissime judicabat, et de futuris callidissime conjiciebat*; so that he must have improved himself in both the Ways mentioned above.

What follows is from THUCYDIDES.  
 ---“ THEMISTOCLES was a Man in  
 “ whom was manifested the Strength  
 “ of Nature; wherein he had some-  
 “ thing worthy of Admiration, dif-  
 “ ferent

“ferent from other Men. For by  
 “his own *Prudence*, without the  
 “Help of *Instruction* before, or after,  
 “he was both of Things present, on  
 “short *Deliberation*, the best Judge,  
 “and of the Future, as to what  
 “might for the most part happen,  
 “the best Conjecturer. What he was  
 “*experienced in*, he was able to *ex-*  
 “*plain*; in what he was *unexperi-*  
 “*enced*, he was not to seek how to  
 “*judge* in a proper manner. He  
 “*foresaw* also, no Man better, what  
 “was *best* or *worst* in any Case  
 “that was dark or doubtful. And,  
 “to say all in a few Words, by the  
 “Force of *Nature*, and Quickness  
 “of *Deliberation*, he was of all Men  
 “the most excellent in pronouncing  
 “what was expedient in any Emer-  
 “gency.” ---- But this great Genius  
 was formed by Art. For it is re-  
 corded by PLUTARCH, that he had  
 learnt from MNESOPHILUS not *Natural*  
*Philosophy*, or *Rhetoric*, but *Wisdom*,

or the Art of true Policy.---This had been taught (it seems) from SOLON down to the Time of the *Sophists*, when it was supplanted by them, and *Rhetoric* supplied its Place.---  
 “THEMISTOCLES was the Man,  
 “whom at the *Olympic Games* the  
 “*Theatre*,” says PAUSANIAS, “ho-  
 “noured by rising up at his first  
 “Appearance amongst them.”

Page 9. HERODOTUS.]---If HERODOTUS deals in *strange Stories* and *Tales*, he gives his Readers sufficient Notice, that they may not confound Truth with Fiction. “Tho’  
 “I am obliged,” says he, \* “to re-  
 “late what is said, yet I am not  
 “obliged to believe every thing with-  
 “out Distinction ; which I desire  
 “may be considered in all the Course  
 “of this History.”---Nothing surely can be more entertaining, or more instructive, than the Account he  
 gives

\* B. VII.



gives of the different *Laws, Customs,*  
 and *Fashions,* of different States and  
 Nations at the same or at different  
 Periods of Time.---CAMBYSES the  
*Persian* King is represented by him,  
 not only as rude and barbarous;  
 but even as a Mad-man, for deride-  
 ing the *Customs,* whether *civil* or  
*sacred,* of other Nations.---“ If  
 “ any one,” says he, “ should pro-  
 “ pose to all Men to choose out of all  
 “ Laws or Customs the most excel-  
 “ lent; upon considering them, they  
 “ would each Man choose those of  
 “ his own Country, so that they  
 “ look upon their own to be most  
 “ excellent. That this is a Senti-  
 “ ment common to all Mankind, I  
 “ could prove by many other In-  
 “ stances, as well as the following.---  
 “ DARIUS, having assembled many  
 “ *Grecians* under his Empire, asked  
 “ them, For how great a Sum they  
 “ would oblige themselves to eat the  
 “ dead Bodies of their Parents; and  
 E 2 “ they

“ they answered, That nothing was  
 “ sufficient to induce them to com-  
 “ mit so great a Crime. He presently  
 “ sent for certain *Indians* called *Cal-*  
 “ *latians*, who are accustomed to eat  
 “ the dead Bodies of their Parents ;  
 “ and, demanding, in the Presence  
 “ of the *Grecians*, and their Inter-  
 “ preters, how much Money they  
 “ would take to burn the Bodies of  
 “ their Parents after Death, they  
 “ made loud Exclamations, and beg-  
 “ ged he would not mention such  
 “ things. And this is the Effect of  
 “ *Custom* ; and therefore, in my  
 “ Opinion, PINDAR says right, that  
 “ *Law or Custom* is universal Mo-  
 “ narch over all Men.”

The *Custom* of the *Persians* as to  
 the Disposition of their Dead being  
 different from the *Grecian*, as well  
 as the *Indian* Custom, if DARIUS  
 himself (their grand Monarch) had  
 been to choose either of these, in all  
 Probability he would have chosen

the *Indian*, rather than have been so profane, so impious, as to suffer his God FIRE to devour the Dead.

Page 16. FOR THUS VIRTUE AND RELIGION ARE UNITED.]---“ In the “ *Athenian* Forum, amidst the Altars “ of the Gods, is one of PITY, “ ΕΛΕΟΥ ΒΟΜΟΣ. To this Deity the “ *Athenians* alone of all the *Grecians* “ pay the greatest Honour, as being “ useful in human Life, and human “ Affairs. By this they manifested “ not only their Philanthropy or “ Virtue above others, but likewise “ their Piety or Religion : And as “ Men excel others in Piety or Religion, so in proportion they meet “ with better Fortune.” *Pausan.*  
p. 15. *Edit. Sylb.*

F I N I S.









